



Connecting tech centers will strengthen region

Saunders Road is part of a vital east-west transportation corridor in the region, connecting business, technology and research centers and helping to stimulate additional economic activity in both Hampton and Newport News.

On the Hampton side, we have Hampton Roads Center, NASA-Langley Research Center, Langley Air Force Base, the National Institute of Aerospace, and the developing Science Park at Hampton Roads Center North.

On the Newport News side, we have Oyster Point, City Center, Jefferson Lab, Canon, and the developing Virginia Tech Center.

In between, connecting J. Clyde Morris Boulevard to the recently completed Commander Shepard Boulevard extension, we have winding, two-lane, Saunders Road, with its open ditches and more than its share of accidents, already carrying 13,500 vehicles per day.

The history of this important transportation corridor in Hampton extends over many years and several phases.

The first phase was completed in 2010 at a cost of \$14 million and included the new interchange of Commander Shepard and Magruder Boulevards and the 0.4 mile extension of Commander Shepard from Magruder to North Campus Parkway.

The second phase opened to traffic in January of this year at a cost of \$9.5 million and extended Commander Shepard 1.3 miles from North Campus Parkway to Big Bethel and Saunders roads.

The third phase – widening Saunders to four lanes for 0.9 miles, from Big Bethel to the Hampton-Newport News city line, near Westview Drive - will be advertised for bids in August, with construction starting in early 2015. This phase will cost \$19 million and has a target completion date of late 2016 or early 2017.

When the third phase is finished, all three projects will reflect an investment of \$42.5 million for 2.6 miles of new and widened highway.

What will remain critical to maximizing the regional benefit of this transportation corridor is for the City of Newport News to widen as soon as possible the 1.2 mile section of roadway from the Hampton-Newport News city line to J. Clyde Morris Boulevard, and to consider widening at a later date Old Oyster Point Road from J. Clyde Morris to Canon Boulevard.



Consultants have looked at traffic projections in both cities. The widening is expected to reduce congestion to a low-to-moderate level for the 19,000 vehicles per day on the Hampton side by 2034. However, if roads in Newport News are not expanded, severe congestion is predicted as traffic grows to 22,000 vehicles per day.

In addition, the elimination of curves and roadside ditches should improve safety on Saunders Road in both Hampton and Newport News.

As we think about this project, we should reflect on the history of Hampton Roads Center Parkway, which links and has spurred economic activity in both cities.

As with Saunders Road/Commander Shepard, Hampton built its section of Hampton Roads Center Parkway first; Newport News followed, as leaders on City Council and in the business community saw beyond the people claiming that the Hampton Roads Center Parkway would mostly benefit Hampton.

But the road runs both ways, and the Newport News end of Hampton Roads Center Parkway has seen more new construction and new tax base than the Hampton end of the Parkway.

Regional, state and national businesses and developers recognize how efficient transportation and new infrastructure support development, redevelopment, job creation and an expanding tax base. Studies have shown that companies look for regions in which to locate, not just individual cities.

To be competitive with other regions, Hampton Roads' localities must work together to connect individual assets and create regional synergies. Partnering to connect our business, technology and research centers by widening Saunders Road to J. Clyde Morris Boulevard would be a strong step forward.